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ABSTRACT

Sex role stereotypes in children's reading materials limit life options. They prevent girls from realizing that all occupations and careers are open to them, and they present a man's role in the world as quite different from that of a woman. Sexual bias in reading material (both text and trade books) may be seen from the frequency of use of masculine and feminine proper names and pronouns (masculine appeared more than twice as often as feminine) and a disparity in the scholastic understandings of girls aged nine (equal to that of boys of the same age) and girls aged thirteen (beginning a decline which continues into adulthood). In order to avoid sexual bias and to encourage girls to reach their full potential, educational materials should reflect the reality of the past and the contributions made by women in history and politics, present both boys and girls in exciting adventures, avoid the stereotyped portrayals of both boys and girls, and emphasize both sexes engaging in similar activities and making responsible decisions. (JM)

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Reading and Sex Role Stereotypes

During the last 25 years textbooks and trade books have been subject to critical appraisal because of distortions and omissions regarding minority groups in American life. The findings have not been encouraging; rather they have been discouraging and even shocking. Members of minority groups have rightly demanded that what is put into the hands of children reflect an egalitarian and accepting view of all people. Children can learn from words and pictures that American life is the composite of contributions from many sectors. The situation is beginning to change in some respects, but in one area there is very little change. As Federbush says. "Nowadays the people even come in a number of assorted tints, but they are still fixed into rigid sex roles."

Traditionally curriculum materials have portrayed people in patent sex role stereotypes. The content of the McGuffey readers indicating what good boys and girls are like and defining roles for the sexes received approval by 19th century Americans. The cultural and moral message became muted in the early 20th century, and by the 1950's texts were expected to be neutral. However, the neutrality did not eliminate sex role stereotyping. The majority of textbooks used by children in elementary school, those published prior to the 1970's, presented a typical family: the father who works, the apron

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clad mother who does not, two children--a brother usually older than his sister--and two pets, usually a dog and a cat whose ages and sexes parallel those of the brother and sister. Boys engage in physically oriented activities which often demand courage while girls play with dolls and help mother cook and clean.

The results of a 1946 analysis of children's textbooks by Child, et. al., indicated that the different roles that boys and girls were expected to play were clearly identified, i.e., girls were passive while boys were active. Although female characters were portrayed as sociable, kind, and timid, they also were inactive, unambitious, and uncreative. Excitement was provided by a girl's getting herself into a dangerous situation from which a boy could rescue her. Tannenbaum in 1954 noted the stereotypes in "all-white Textbooks Town." Children were born, but mothers were never pregnant; fathers came home from work carrying a briefcase, and the only tragedy was the death of a dog.

Pottker examined a 1971 reading series and found that women's roles were still consistently stereotyped although the series focused less on the family than did those series published earlier. Any woman, including a queen, who is inside a house is working even if she is talking with her children. Even the female animals wear aprons. The occupational roles are consistently stereotyped, and the activities of children are sex differentiated with boys making things and girls

playing with dolls. In one episode an eight year old boy rescues two fourteen year old girls who are standing screaming on chairs because there is a frog on the floor. Kidd's analysis of another recently published set of readers reveals the same sex stereotyped activities of both parents and children. The father's chief occupation appears to be coming home; the mother never goes to work or drives a car; she helps her daughter make a cake. When the girl has trouble skating, her brother comments that that is what one expects from a girl.

Steffire concluded that basal readers present a biased version of the work women do. He found a great discrepancy between the work of women as it is portrayed in basal reading series and the work women do in real life. Steffire did not fault the basal readers for this discrepancy on the grounds that readers do not have as a purpose the dissemination of accurate occupational information. However, since children are conditioned by their environment, it would appear that the information presented in books should at least be accurate and should present a picture of the world as it exists today.

Stereotypes certainly limit, if they do not prohibit, life options. Materials which children read could and should represent a number of life options to them. Materials presented in textbooks now used by children in schools would not encourage a girl to feel that all occupations or careers are open to her. Although more options are

pictured as available to boys, the textbooks still limit, for the boys are made patently aware that a man's role in the world is quite different from that of a woman, and that the line separating these options cannot be crossed.

One indication of whether or not sexual bias is found in material read by children both in text and trade books, can be determined by the use of masculine and feminine proper names and pronouns. The American Heritage Word Frequency Book by Carroll and others is a count of 5,088,721 words sampled from all books used as texts or for free reading by children in grades three through nine. All of the books selected, which were suggested by educators, were designated for particular grade levels. The more than one thousand different publications included books used as texts in courses as varied as reading, language, music, art, shop, home economics, science, and social studies, plus a large sampling from library books suggested for the grade and age levels. Obviously the content of material cannot be determined without the context, but since nouns or pronouns are subjects of sentences, the number of times a particular word appears in material is significant. One hundred eleven proper names had a Standard Frequency Index of 50.0 or better which means that they were among the top ten per cent of words in frequency of use; 83 of these were boys' names, but only 28 were girls' names. There were 86,644 masculine pronouns but only 25,089 feminine pronouns. The word boy or boys appeared twice as frequently as girl or girls.

Last month's release of scores by the National Assessment of Educational Progress raises some provocative and disturbing questions. In the eight learning areas surveyed, males generally do better than females in four fields: mathematics, science, social studies, and citizenship. In the other four areas--reading, writing, literature, and music--females consistently outperform males significantly only in writing and maintain a slight advantage in music. In reading and literature female achievement levels surpass those of males at ages nine, thirteen, and seventeen, but fall behind males by the young adult ages, 26-35.

The data in reading reveal some interesting information. Although girls scored higher than boys in reading at ages nine, thirteen, and seventeen, boys scored higher than girls in 22 of the exercises. The characteristics of those exercises are worth noting. Most of them involve reading signs, forms, and charts, or are concerned with what traditionally have been considered male oriented activities. Males did notably well also on other exercises which again were concerned with male oriented activities such as driving a sports car, hunting and fishing, and reading a newspaper advertisement for a job. Nine year old girls did better than boys in identifying reasons why a sports car can turn corners more easily than a passenger car, but males were significantly better at the other three age levels. Males were consistently better than females in responding to the sign, "Horsepower without horse sense is fatal."

A particularly puzzling factor in the National Assessment data is that in comparing male-female achievement in the male dominated areas of mathematics, science, social studies, and citizenship, the scholastic understandings of males and females at age nine are fairly equal. However, by age 13, females have begun to decline in achievement which continues through age 17 and into adulthood. The reason for this disparity is not known, but Roy Forbes, NAEP director, wonders if there are subtle and not-so-subtle forces both within the educational system and society in general that affect female achievement. He says,"It is becoming more and more important for society and the schools to encourage women to consider entering these fields. Curricula must be unbiased to give women the opportunity to make their own choices and to reach their full potential."

Speculation about the reasons for these differences is an intriguing exercise. Is a self fulfilling prophecy operating? Have girls been so conditioned by the materials they read and by adult expectations which reinforce the materials as to believe that boys are inherently superior in these several areas? Do girls accept this as fact and convince themselves of their inferiority? If such conditioning is a factor, it behooves us to take a serious look at what we are doing to more than half of the members of our society and take some positive steps to amelioate the situation.

It is obvious that educational materials all too frequently present children with situations that are both contrived and stereotyped.

However, if we accept that premise, it is essential to determine what they should include. Educational materials, first of all, should reflect the reality of the past. The role of women is a part of our history which has been understated and which should be emphasized. Probably all children have heard of Pocahontas and of Sacajawea, but how far does their knowledge extend with regard to other Indian women and their role in society? Children should learn of the roles and accomplishments of women members of the various ethnic groups in the country. Each group of immigrants made its contribution to society, and the role of women in making those contributions should be examined. In brief, the contributions made by women in spite of the discrimination they faced should be a part of the education of children.

Accounts of the westward movement describe the struggles and problems of the pioneer man, but give minimal attention to the pioneer woman who experienced the same or similar struggles and problems. Textbooks should acknowledge the fact that single women and female heads of families also participated in the westward movement. Frontier life was hardly a totally male dominated existence; women played an equally important role in the struggle for existence. Pioneer women did more than cook, sew, and care for children although those tasks were far more time consuming than they were in later years. The life of the pioneer family, by necessity, had to be a partnership; it is true that there were male and female roles,

but there also was an overlapping or roles, and the women members of pioneer families were distinctly and definitely involved in decision making.

For many years large segments of the population of this country lived in rural areas. The family farm was a joint enterprise; the farmer could not have operated his farm without the work carried on by his feminine counterpart. Economic conditions mandated that the farm family had to be, to a large degree, self sufficient. There was, for example,little cash to buy food. Crews of workers who harvested the crops had to be fed; food had to be preserved to feed the family through the long winters. Without it starvation was a grim specter for the farm family.

As there were single women involved in the westward movement, so also were there single pioneer women who contributed to frontier life; some of them were teachers or storekeepers; some of them farmed. Whatever their occupations happened to be, their contributions should be a part of the information children receive in school. Certainly there is an obligation to present factual information rather than a romanticized version of the truth.

Children should be aware of the role of women in the history and political life of the country. That the status of women during a particular historical period is allied to the social and political conditions of the time should be included and specifically noted in the materials they read. Beginning with the American Revolution,

women have played prominent roles in times of war. Women have been involved in all of the political movements in the history of the country.

Both boys and girls should be knowledgeable about the history of the women's movement including the ways in which women fought for equal rights long before the passage of the eighteenth amendment and before the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. Women used various means to break the education barriers, and they ultimately proved that mental exertion did not damage the female brain. Women have used organizations to advance the struggle for equal rights, such as the WCTU, the suffragettes, the League of Women Voters as well as social and religious groups. The history and achievements of these groups should be noted. Women were involved in the labor movement and were able to overcome the sweat shop conditions and wage discrimination.

New guidelines issued by publishers of textbooks to eliminate sex role stereotypes represent a positive effort to allow both boys and girls to achieve their potential. Both boys and girls should be presented in exciting and adventurous roles. The depiction of boys playing in the real world outdoors while girls sit inside and watch them is not a reflection of reality. Girls climb trees, play ball, and now even the traditional Little League barrier has been broken.

The price of the standardization and rigidity of sex roles is paid by children of both sexes. Maccoby has reported that analytic

thinking, creativity, and general intelligence are associated with cross-sex typing. Thus, rigid sex role definitions not only foster unhappiness in children but also hamper the child's fullest intellectual and social development. The boy with musical or artistic talent who prefers to pursue his bent should be encouraged to do so rather than to engage in what are considered to be masculine activities, usually physical. After all, Picasso and Rubenstein could hardly be termed sissies.

There are a number of ways in which girls can be portrayed. Girls do achieve academically and may be rewarded for their achievements. Girls probably get into as much mischief as boys, but they also are decision makers and leaders. Girls participate in physical activities; they do not only play with dolls, sit indoors watching boys play, and learn to cook and clean.

Although textbooks have presented boys as more interesting people than girls, the portrayal of boys as daring and adventurous is not particularly realistic. In real life boys become frightened, display emotions, and spend much of their time in non-adventurous situations. Boys read, study, learn to cook, and play musical instruments. They may be perplexed about solutions to problems and seek answers from girls.

When boys and girls are shown working together, both sexes should participate in decision making on an equal basis. Girls who solve problems should be recognized for their good ideas by both boys and

girls. Boys and girls engage in similar activities in real life. Both sexes cook, play musical instruments, read, and play games, and they should be portrayed in this fashion.

Rather than the apron clad stereotyped mother in textbooks, mothers should be pictured as interesting people who have many and varied interests. They may pursue full or part time careers outside the home; they may have hobbies; they may be active in civic affairs. Mothers are employed not only as teachers, nurses, or secretaries; they also are lawyers, doctors, chemists, business executives, bus drivers, engineers, police officers, and more.

Textbooks generally portray fathers as competent, strong individuals. The father usually is pictured as the "fun" parent, but rarely is he shown involved in domestic activities nor does he display any emotion. Fathers should be shown doing chores around the house and as individuals self sufficient in running a household. They should be portrayed discussing ideas with mothers and making joint decisions with mothers.

Materials used by children should reflect the world as it is. While it is true that most textbooks do not have as their purpose the presentation of career options for children, they, nevertheless, should reflect the current situation as well as the possibilities for the future. Since the majority of children, both boys and girls, will pursue some kind of work during their adult lives, it seems

reasonable to expose them to a variety of career options; this could conceivably include both careers and the use of leisure time.

Certainly girls should have an opportunity to read about women who are involved in interesting work, women who are something other than the colorless housewives pictured so often in the past. Girls should know that women are executives, pilots, jockeys, judges, scientists, artists, and that they can go into any field they wish to pursue. Boys should know that men are chefs, telephone operators, nurses, stewards, etc. In short, children should learn that a variety of life options are open to them and that careers no longer are limited by sex. That these life options are open to both sexes should be made patently clear by using a language that does not assign professional or occupational roles to either sex. Because language is the medium through which people learn, writers of educational materials should take particular care that the words do not express stereotyped attitudes or expectations.

Finally, textbook writers should make clear that women function as effectively as men as decision makers. From the time of Eve and Ruth, and certainly from the time of Cleopatra, it has been obvious that women have played definite though closeted roles in decision making. The whole history of women's struggle for their rights has been a battle to bring the power of the executive out of closets and bedrooms and into the open. It is the storming of this bastion that

occasions the biggest and most serious male resistance. Although they know that women are as capable of running the affairs of the world as are men, it is this last hallmark of "male supremacy" that men cherish so emotionally though they have nothing but a childlike reasoning to support their fervor.

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